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Reading Trends and College-Age Students: The Research, the Issues, and the Role of Libraries

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For years many people have believed that reading for pleasure is a self-indulgent and escapist activity. Until the 1990s, few researchers actually studied the role of leisure reading in life. But studies from the last two decades demonstrate that recreational reading plays an essential — in fact, fundamental — role in our lives. Ironically, this knowledge comes at a time when large-scale surveys by the **National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)** show that reading has been declining in popularity for a couple of decades, particularly in the college-aged population. Those who teach liberal arts have witnessed firsthand this wane in enthusiasm for reading. But more recently, studies by the **Pew** foundation seem to contradict these anecdotal observations and the **NEA** findings. This article will explore what the

actual state of reading is on our college campuses, why reading is important for students, what barriers exist to leisure reading, whether reading on screens helps or hinders, and what academic libraries can do to help both readers and non-readers.

The State of Reading in the College-Aged Population

NEA studies published in 2004, 2007, and 2009¹ suggest that although reading as a leisure activity dramatically declined over the course of 20 years, it had marginally increased again by 2009. In the 18-to-24-year-old category, the percentage of Americans who read a book in the previous year was 59.8 in 1982, 53.3 in 1992, 42.8 in 2002, and 51.7 in 2008. Although the last study shows a reversal in the downward trend, the percentage of 18- to 24-year olds who read a book in 2008 was still significantly lower than it was a quarter century before. The **NEA** based these numbers on pleasure reading (books not

required for school or work) as well as “literary” reading — which they define as fiction, plays, or poetry (highbrow or lowbrow). But even when respondents were asked whether they read any non-required book, the numbers were similar (59 percent in 1992, 52 percent in 2002, and 50.7 percent in 2008). The fact that over the course of two decades half the respondents indicated that they do not read books for pleasure is a cause for concern.

In 2014, **Pew** took its own snapshot of readers, and found that 79 percent of 18- to 29-year olds had read a book in the previous year, a statistic that remained almost unchanged from its study the previous year.² In five short years, 50.7 percent (**NEA**) changed to 79 percent (**Pew**). Why the dramatic increase? The question that **Pew** asked readers was slightly different than the one used by the **NEA**: “During the past 12 months, about how many books did you read either all or part of the way through?” As we can see, **Pew**’s definition of reading a book is much broader than the **NEA**’s. Respondents did not have to

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finish a book for it to count, and reading for work or school could be included. The good news is that college-aged students do indeed seem to be reading. In fact, the typical 18- to 29-year old, according to **Pew**, had read an average of five books in 2013. But there is no evidence that this reading is actually for pleasure. The fact that the number of readers is so much larger than those from the **NEA** leisure-reading studies suggests that many people are reading books because they must, either for school or work.

A recent study by **SuHua Huang** and colleagues indicates that college students are reading material from social media sites far more than from books. In "Reading Habits of College Students in the United States," **Huang** observes that students are reading about twice as much material from social media sites as from leisure books.³ Books for pleasure are being supplanted by Facebook and Twitter posts.

Barriers to Reading Books

Screen reading is not only overtaking other types of reading but also affecting the way we read all material. We know from Web usability experts that we read only a fraction of the content on a Web page. In his 2014 book, *Don't Make Me Think Revisited*,⁴ **Steven**

Krug observes that most users only glance at a new page and do not even look at large parts of it. Online reading is characterized by skimming pages and jumping from one link to the next, activities that interrupt linear thought processes and make us more impatient with sustained narrative. In the **Pulitzer Prize** finalist book *The Shallows*, **Nicholas Carr** argues that because screen reading encourages surface skimming, it discourages deep thinking and sustained reflection — a situation that is particularly alarming for college students.⁵ Online reading may, in fact, be rewiring our brain circuitry, making us less capable of book-length reading. **Carr** speaks for many readers, when he writes:

Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text.⁶

Compounding the problem is our increasing reliance on mobile devices. Nowhere are we exempt from an incoming text, phone call, voicemail alert, task reminder, low battery warning, or update notice — all of which

interrupt whatever we are doing by dinging, vibrating, ringing, playing music, or popping up. In "Driven to Distraction," **John Lorinc** reminds us that "digital communications technology has demonstrated a striking capacity to subdivide our attention into smaller and smaller increments; increasingly, it seems as if the day's work has become a matter of interrupting the interruptions."⁷ College students are especially reliant on mobile devices. In 2014, **Pew** found that 83 percent of 18- to 29-year olds owned a smart phone compared to 58 percent of the general population.⁸ Carving uninterrupted chunks of time out of their days to read book-length material, and having the attentive mind-set that such reading requires is becoming more and more elusive for students.

Reading Books Matters

We want young people to experience the joy of reading so that they will become life-long readers. Research demonstrates that reading matters for a number of reasons. Readers used to be thought of as lonely "bookworms." But psychology researchers at the **University of Toronto** have found that the more people read fiction, the more adept they are socially: "The tendency to become deeply absorbed in a story appears to be related to both exposure to narrative fiction and measures of social ability."⁹ When we read fiction we walk in others' shoes, imagining what it is like to think and feel as another

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person. By imagining these thoughts and experiencing these emotions, we enlarge our understanding of others and increase our capacity for empathy.

Research from the NEA indicates that those who read books for pleasure are more likely to vote, participate in volunteer work, play sports, attend sporting events, engage in outdoor activities, attend cultural events, visit museums, attain higher levels of education, and work in more financially rewarding jobs.¹⁰ Pleasure readers are active agents in their worlds.

Nicole Speer and colleagues discovered that when patients read stories, parts of their brains light up as if they were performing the actions themselves.¹¹ Reading about an imaginary world can so completely remove us from the here and now that we lose track of time and place, and become totally immersed in a fictional world. Imagining ourselves as characters in other times and places can serve as a dress rehearsal for life. We can try out different roles, methods of coping, and ways of living.

Authors are skilled at articulating emotions. In *Read for Your Life*, **Gold** observes that we cannot deal with feelings until we articulate them and register them in our consciousness.¹² Fictional works help us cope with emotions by expressing them for us. Books can transform our lives in a number of other ways. Committed readers in **Catherine Ross's** study said that books had been able to change their perspective, provide a new model for living, help them view life from a different angle, offer an enlarged set of possibilities, provide motivation, give them inner strength, and instill courage to make a change.¹³ Reading, as **Miedema** observes in his book, *Slow Reading*, is the making of a deeper, more reflective self.¹⁴

Reading also increases cognitive skills and the likelihood of student success. The more people read for pleasure, the greater their intellectual development. **Stanovich** and his colleagues found that people who read more exhibited broader and deeper general knowledge.¹⁵ Numerous studies have shown that increased reading correlates with greater writing skills, an enlarged vocabulary, and grammatical proficiency. It is very difficult to become a skilled writer without being a committed reader. In *The Power of Reading*, **Stephen Krashen** discusses the variety of ways that reading increases cognitive, communication, and critical-thinking skills — the foundational blocks upon which students' academic lives are built.¹⁶

Reading during the college years may be one of the most important times to read for pleasure. In "Reading Matters in the Academic Library," I point out that "those who develop the habit of reading have a greater likelihood of success in their immediate and long-term future. College-aged students are also at a point in their lives when reading can open up worlds — can indeed motivate and

inspire them for the future. If students have not developed a love of reading by the time they finish college, they will be less likely to do so later in their lives."¹⁷

Most of the research on reading has focused on books. Other types of reading material may also confer benefits. But what is important is that students turn to books as readily as they do blog posts or newspaper articles. After all, a large percentage of the written word is available in books. And what we do know is that, far from being an escapist activity, reading for pleasure plays an essential social, psychological, and cognitive role in our lives.

Reading on Screens

If screen reading can negatively impact our desire to read book-length material, should we discourage eBook reading? Even if that were possible, we cannot ignore the fact that eBook reading is on the rise. Over the course of the past twenty years, according to ACRL statistics, college libraries have witnessed a steady decline in print circulation.¹⁸ **Pew** studies from late 2012¹⁹ and early 2014²⁰ confirm that the number of college-aged respondents who had read a print book in the last year declined from 78 to 73 percent. Conversely, the number of 18- to 29-year olds who read an eBook jumped from 21 to 37 percent during the same time frame. This trend is part of the overall movement away from print and towards online books. As early as 2010, **Amazon** announced that it was selling more eBooks than hardcover editions; by 2011, that figure also included paperbacks.²¹

eBooks help more than they hinder reading by making it far easier to engage in the activity. The ubiquity of mobile devices makes e-reading more convenient and accessible than ever before. The various reading devices, options, and apps are all constantly improving and becoming more affordable. With the click of a mouse, readers can download a book and experience instant gratification. eBooks make it possible to carry around a weightless library, perform electronic searches for terms, customize fonts, look up dictionary definitions of words, highlight passages, make electronic sticky notes, avoid library fines, and stop cluttering up bookshelves with print copies. But eBook reading is not for everyone, and print is far from dead. According to **Pew**, twice as many college-aged students read print books as they do eBooks.²² Some readers find that print facilitates concentration; others suffer eye strain when reading on screens; and many are simply attached to print books. Print is a technology that has survived hundreds of years. As difficult as it can be financially, libraries need to provide options for both types of readers.

And as I have argued in "Are Books Becoming Extinct in Academic Libraries?" academic eBook vendors need to improve their platforms to make online reading a more viable alternative.²³ Scholarly books need page numbers, not just location percentages. They also require hyperlinked indexes and table of contents so that navigation is compa-

able to print books. Although some scholarly eBooks include these features, many still do not. In "E-Reading Rises as Device Ownership Rises," **Pew** found that more people read books on their e-readers (57 percent), tablets (55 percent), and phones (32 percent) than on their computers (29 percent).²⁴ Yet academic vendors continue to focus on computer platforms at the expense of mobile options.

The Role of the Library

Academic librarians do not, for the most part, view the promotion of leisure reading as part of their mandate; fewer still provide readers' advisory services or programs. Certainly resources are scarce and time is even more limited, but we cannot remain passive in this critical undertaking. Our parent institutions prioritize student success and retention, so what better way to support these goals than to foster a culture of reading? As librarians, we have greater influence than we might think. Research has shown that more students would read if we helped facilitate the process. **Gilbert and Fister** discovered that 93 percent of college students truly enjoy reading for pleasure.²⁵ Time pressures interfere with their desire to read, but students would welcome efforts by librarians to help them discover reading material.

Because librarians are skilled at finding material, we sometimes underestimate the difficulties of finding a good book to read in a college library. Unlike bookstores that have well-labeled sections of books, college libraries are often located in huge buildings that are not organized for browsing and are intimidating to many readers. Books in academic libraries become invisible, hidden away on multiple floors. Confronted with overwhelming choice, many potential readers give up. Students face another roadblock when looking for a good book to read. College libraries often buy hardcover books and strip them of their covers. These dust jackets contain essential material such as plot summaries, author information, and review snippets. **Catherine Ross** found that avid readers made effective reading choices by using clues provided by book packaging.²⁶ She also discovered that finding the right book became a self-reinforcing system while unsuccessful searches killed the desire to read.

No one is going to read for pleasure if finding the right book is a chore. Consider buying paperback novels for your library and creating a popular reading collection. Libraries that have done so have found the books circulate well. We need to entice students in the same way that successful bookstores do so. In *The Customer-Driven Library*, **Jeannette Woodward** points out that bookstores control the "bookstore experience."²⁷ Libraries have lagged far behind in creating a similar library experience. Attractive book displays on a theme can attract readers and provide them with a manageable focus for decision making. College libraries often overlook the power of limited choice that book displays provide for users. Booklists are another way

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of promoting books and helping users make choices. Bookmarks are particularly useful for read-alike suggestions (if you liked this author, try these...). College libraries should also provide a virtual browsing experience — creating, for example, scrolling shelves of recommended books on their homepages. Book review blogs and tweets on new books

can also stimulate interest. Creating a culture of reading is one of the most important ways of attracting readers. Academic libraries have done so by creating, promoting, and facilitating services such as in-person and online book clubs, author readings and discussion, and one-book-one-community events.

Author **Ursula Le Guin** wrote that the “century of the book” was from 1850 to 1950 and that we cannot expect to return to this golden age of reading.²⁸ This may be true, but librarians can still be a positive force for

change in this post-golden-age reading world. And although libraries and library schools have focused in recent years on emerging technologies rather than reading, academic librarians need to inspire and attract college readers. As **Meagan Lacy** observes in *The Slow Book Revolution*, “Promoting recreational reading in academic libraries builds continuity between school and public library services so that library use is encouraged during and after college, that is, throughout one’s lifetime.”²⁹ 🌳

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